



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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District of Arizona*

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VIOLENT HOSTAGE TAKER RECEIVES LIFE SENTENCE

PHOENIX – Ruben Franco-Plaza aka Ruben Plaza-Uzeta, 23, of El Rosario, Sinaloa, Mexico, was sentenced here Tuesday to life in prison plus seven years by U.S. District Judge Roger G. Strand. Franco-Plaza was found guilty by a federal jury on October 19, 2006 Conspiracy to Take Hostages, Hostage Taking, Conspiracy to Harbor Illegal Aliens, Harboring Illegal Aliens, and Possessing and Using a Firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence.

The evidence at trial showed that this defendant along with at least seven others were part of a violent group of alien smugglers. In January 2003, this group held at least 56 illegal aliens hostage at a house in Phoenix. While held hostage at gunpoint, the victims were beaten with fists, kicked, pistol whipped, and threatened with death. One victim has his face burned with a cigarette. Other victims had a plastic bags put over their heads and were beaten until they could not breath. Three of these victims gave emotional and tear-filled testimony at trial.

When sentencing the defendant, the judge found that the defendant demonstrated a leadership role. Judge Strand also found that ransoms were demanded for the victims' release, that the victims suffered serious bodily injury and that the victims were vulnerable due to their illegal status in the United States. Judge Strand when imposing the maximum term of life for the two hostage taking counts stated the reason for his sentence was the "evidence at trial established he was a leader" and his "conduct was mean-spirited and brutal to a high-degree." Defendant received concurrent ten year terms for the two Harboring charges and received a seven year consecutive term for the Use of a Firearm during the hostage taking. Franco-Plaza is currently serving a five year sentence for a drive by shooting and aggravated assault convictions in Maricopa County Superior Court, CR2003-018302-002-DT. Franco-Plaza was convicted at trial with co-defendant, Jesus Medina-Nevarez. Medina-Nevarez was sentenced on January 23, 2007 and also received a sentence of life following by a seven year term. The remaining two defendants entered pleas of guilty possession or use of a firearm in a crime of violence and are set for sentencing on March 19, 2007. convicted at trial with Medina-Nevarez, are set for sentencing on March 6, 2007, before the Honorable Judge Strand.

The investigation leading to the guilty verdict and sentence was conducted by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Pinal County Sheriff's Office, Phoenix Police Department and the Peoria Police Department.

The prosecution was handled by Lisa Jennis Settel, Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix, Arizona.

CASE NUMBER: CR-05-225-PHX-RGS

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